Note by LMB: This early speech was originally written for my Guest of Honor appearance at SwanCon 23 in Perth, Australia, in 1998, and recycled on a few other occasions. A lot of the ideas I develop, revisit, or refine later are here in proto-form.

WHEN WORLD-VIEWS COLLIDE

A few years ago at a convention, I attended a panel discussion on the topic of "best new fantasy books." The panel featured, in addition to a couple of writers and editors, a reviewer and critic who had been in the business for several decades. During this time he had read, I'm sure, thousands of books. He made the interesting statement that in his view, there were only three good fantasy novels published in the previous year, which he named. (He seemed quite oblivious to the fact that he'd just insulted all the writers sharing the table with him, none of whom were the authors of the books in question.) All right, I thought–this man was obviously using some strange personal value of the word "good" which was not shared by most of the rest of us. As he continued to speak, it dawned on me that to qualify as "good" for him, a book had to produce a particular psychological frisson *in him*, a special and, for such a jaded and stuffed reader, increasingly rare effect. He appeared to be conflating his response to the book with some elusive objective quality *in* the book that he called "good."

Now, the fact that different people have different ideas about what constitutes a "good" work of fiction accounts for there being more than one book in the bookstore, and a good thing too. It would be a boring world if all our tastes were identical. Even the tastes of a single individual vary, sometimes wildly, from day to day and year to year. Anyone who's had the experience of re-reading an old favorite and fondly-remembered book from their youth, and having it fall apart before their horrified eyes, knows exactly what I'm talking about. No two people, reading the same text, will create exactly the same reading experience in their heads, nor will the same person experience the same book identically at different times of their life. A book, the real book, the art as it takes place and makes its existence, requires two elements, the text on the page, and the mind that is processing or remembering that text. "The Book," the thing I as a reader love or hate or remember for the rest of my life till the day I die, is the whole cascade of thought and emotion and experience that occurs as I run my eyes across the type. The mind without the text is un-moved, unawakened, blank; the text without the mind is dead, meaningless, senseless, no more than ink blotches on a bundle of paper.

This creates a problem both for the would-be critic, trying to assign value to fiction, and to the writer. As a writer, I am keenly aware that I am not in control of half my art. The exact same text one reader finds exciting, subtle, nuanced, funny, and moving, the next reader may find boring, dull, or unmemorable. Changing the text to capture the second reader may do nothing more than lose me the first. The same *reader* may construct the work differently at two different times, depending on how their reading methods and expectations have changed: not just the reader who finds a beloved book from their youth now much thinner, but one who finds a book which whizzed past their ear without making an impression on the first read now suddenly and strangely grown richer and utterly arresting.

Now, the critics have developed all kinds of protocols for assigning value to fiction, based on one or another idiosyncratic literary theory. I am more interested in data: how *do* people really read–what is going on in their heads? And is there anything I as a writer can or ought to be doing to increase my readership?

When I was a kid, my mother would occasionally greet me or my brothers with the quelling question, "So, what have you done to justify your existence today?" (Something to do with her New England Protestant background, I think.) To which my grown-up self wants to shout back down the time line–"Mom–I'm nine years old. It's *breakfast!* Give me a break!" I have a similar problem with people who demand that art justify itself by some measure of utility. I am deeply suspicious of any system of thought that presents literature as moral medicine, and so promotes the writer or critic to the status of physician to the world. The world is more complicated than that.

If a value of "good" is going to be assigned to a work on any other basis than sheer numbers, popularity, it involves assigning superior value to a particular type of reading or a particular type of reader: some form of elitism, the covert or overt declaration that *that* bunch of readers, over here, is superior and more worth pleasing than *that other* bunch of readers over there. Once past the simplest criteria of spelling, grammar, and minimum coherence in prose, a judgment of a book entails, inescapably, a judgment of its audience. I find this an unsettling thought.

The issue is further confused by the fact that people read books for different reasons, varying through intellectual stimulation, exposure to new ideas or landscapes, comfort, escape, a particular emotional tweak, armchair travel, or to block out the fact that they are trapped in a metal cigar with 400 other people hurtling through the air at 300 miles an hour and have no control whatsoever on whether they will live or die in the next few hours. Some readers may need to get a life, though I think it's more often the case that some

critics need to get a clue. You never know what secret burdens anyone may be carrying. Some people have far too much life already, and need to get away from it for a few hours. It is impossible, arrogant beyond measure, to assign a hierarchy of values to the reasons people read books. I like to think of "Ms. Average Reader" as a childrens' cancer hospice nurse, home from a particularly bad day at work. To say to such a reader, you should put aside that escape literature and instead read something that will make you a better, more enlightened person, is simply absurd.

Still, the sheer mass of possible books to read (or write) forces us all to perform drastic triage. All choices exclude as well as include, but choices must be made or you can't even start. The right choice for a writer is pretty simple, really. I should write for an ideal audience whose tastes closely match my own, to mine own self be true. Hence I write character-centered science fiction novels, and not near-future dystopias, or contemporary romances, or Westerns, or true-crime books. The right choice for a critic is a much thornier problem, since it's far less clear that each critic should declare as good only those books which exactly match that critic's taste. (Although that happens.) Yet an honest reviewer can, after all, only report the reading experience they actually had.

So… why *do* people like different books? I came at a notion about the answer to this question through my struggle to understand the meaning of the old literary term, "theme." In my extreme youth, I had trouble getting my mind around a definition of theme since I, and the people who were trying to explain it to me, tended to conflate it with plot summary. A true statement like "plot is what happens, and theme is what the book's about" failed to create a distinction for me. It wasn't until I became a writer that it came clear. Plot is what a book's about. Theme is what a book's *really* about.

And some of my books, by God, had identifiable themes, at least in retrospect. (I was as pleased to realize this as the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, a nouveau riche character in a play by, I believe, Molière, was to learn that he spoke prose.) *Barrayar*, for example, might be described in terms that emphasized its political plot, which involves a planetary civil war, or its societal plot, which involves an off-worlder woman slowly penetrating the meanings of the new culture into which she has been plunged. But the book's *theme* is about the cost to one's identity of becoming a parent, explored through six parallel couples and coming to a thematic climax simultaneously with the political plot. The Imperial Residence burned not only as the climax to a fight, but as a symbol of the phoenix-pyre by which the main character's old identity a single person was finally annihilated and her new one as a mother forged.

Cool, I thought. So that was theme. (Mind you, it took me writing some six or seven books to figure this out.) But looking back

over the book, I could see how various persons, events, and objects along the way acted as supports and symbols and comments on and embodiments to this theme. If any of you have seen the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, there's a scene where the 'toon character Roger pulls his hand out of a handcuff to which he's been attached for a while. "Could you do that any time?" the human asks indignantly. "No!" says Roger, wide-eyed. "Only when it was funny!" *Barrayar* was by no means a book where "anything could happen", though the initial set-up invited many possible plots. But only the plot that embodied the theme was the "right" one.

So was I writing the book to display the theme, then? Well… no. Because I, and most other writers I know, usually can't even identify a book's theme till it's all over, sometimes years later. Theme surely can't really pre-exist; it's more accurately thought of as an emergent property, arising from the book as and after it is written. Furthermore, a novel is large and complex and may well have more than one theme. And yet as I wrote I was clearly checking the book's choices against some inner template of rightness, some very non-liner inner demon or time-traveler who knew what was right before the scenes and moments and objects were written or even thought of.

I think a more useful take on the problem than theme in this context might be "world-view." World-view is the way each human being sees the world as "really being": which political or moral views are right or wrong, whether God or any other supernatural phenomena exist or don't, what kind of people are interesting or valuable and what kind aren't, how economics "really" work. It's everyone's own inner map of the world, which many mistake for the territory. Every writer writes their world-view; we cannot escape it, unless we're writing utter hack work to order in every detail, and even there it will leak through. And world-view is not limited to writers.

It follows that every time a reader reads a book, two world-views meet, or collide. There are, I think, four possible interactions between the reader's world-view and the writer's.

The world-views can match. In this case, the reader will have a "comfortable" literary experience. The reader's world-views are not being challenged, but rather, confirmed. This has nothing to do with whether the events and persons portrayed in the book are pleasant or not. So, oddly, a cynical, angry reader encountering a cynical, angry book will actually find it comfortable, and go away muttering with pleasure things like, "This guy really knows what he's talking about! Everyone should read this book, and get their heads straightened out! That's telling it like it is!"

A side-scenario of this may be when a world-view is presented that the reader has no reason to believe is true from real life, but wistfully wishes were so, as in certain women's romance novels.

Second, the world-views can collide. In this case, the reader will find his world-views denied or disconfirmed by the text, which can be unpleasant, uncomfortable, or even infuriating. The reader will in this case heap scorn on the book, and sometimes its author, as when a left-leaning reader rejects the political scenarios in a book by a right-wing writer or a woman derides a book by a man who portrays women in ways she finds idiotic. That same angry reader mentioned before may reject with scorn a book that portrays the world as "too nice." It challenges his world-view, and he rejects it. "People aren't really like that! I know people, and people are scum!" Most people, most of the time, respond to challenges to their world-view and the extreme discomfort it engenders by defending their world-view, and finding some "good reason" to reject the challenging data as false, weak, biased, or wrong. Sometimes, obviously, the rejecting reader is quite right.

A third possible interaction is the complete miss. World-views may be so incompatible as to be mutually incomprehensible, in which case the book is rejected not as wrong, but as gibberish. (A related phenomenon, pointed out to me by a middle school teacher, is where the readers internally edit or alter the book, an active misreading, so that it makes "more sense" to them.)

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the reader's world-view can be expanded. This is, I think, one of the chief delights of literature, when it happens, and the source of that elusive "sense of wonder" which so many people have when encountering science fiction and fantasy. Readers' world-views can be expanded in a thousand ways by reading; they can take in new knowledge about places and history or science or surfing or motherhood or any of the manifold activities of humanity; they can acquire new psychological or moral insights that may never have occurred to them before. The reader departs the work *changed*, sometimes profoundly, in their world-view, which can never be quite as small again afterward.

I think the problem of my jaded critic, who complained that it was so hard to find good books anymore, may be a problem in this area. He's read so many books by now, it's almost impossible for any writer to come up with something which will push out the boundaries of his mind in that extraordinary sense-of-wonder way. When we are twelve, it's almost impossible to read any book that *doesn't* stretch our minds. The colliding world-view is accepted into our own, and a wonderful feeling of growth results. All things are new in the dawn of the world. Or world-view.

So a novel, therefore, is a slice out of the writer's world-view. The slice in turn, if it is coherent, generates as an emergent property a comment on the human condition, which is the book's theme. We experience theme, even if we cannot articulate it openly, as a wonderful sense of meaning to the book. The book has succeeded in

creating meaning inside the head of another person. And in *my* world-view, that's what art is for.

Thank you.